



Virginia place name research encompasses the investigation of the location and/or historical background of the names of populated places and geographic features for a given time period. Although no single comprehensive, time-inclusive dictionary of Virginia places exists, the Library of Virginia has a wide collection of published resources on this subject as well as an extensive collection of current and historical Virginia maps. This guide focuses on materials offering statewide coverage, but there are also many county or place specific materials in the collection that may be useful.

As a first step, search the Library of Virginia Online Catalog for books, magazines, newspapers, and state and federal documents using the subject headings below. Each will produce a number of further choices.

Names, Geographical – United States

Names, Geographical — Virginia

Names, Geographical — Virginia – *County Name*

Virginia – Gazetteers

County name, (Va.) – History

Dwellings – Virginia – *County Name*

A keyword search for a specific place name may also produce useful results. In addition, local histories often may provide explanations of the origins of area place names.

Researching Virginia Place Names

I. FINDING THE LOCATION OF A PLACE IN THE STATE

1. MODERN LARGE-SCOPE SOURCES THAT INCLUDE VIRGINIA

USGS Geographic Names Information System

<<http://geonames.usgs.gov/gnishome.html>>

The GNIS (Geographic Names Information System), developed by the USGS (United States Geological Survey) in cooperation with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, contains information about the almost 2 million physical and cultural geographic features labeled on the USGS 7.5-minute topographic maps. Variant names of each feature described in the database are included, and references are made to a feature's location by state, county, and geographic coordinates. Several other geographical name sites are offered by other sources. Many have downloaded the current or back versions of GNIS as the basis for their data. These may offer added enhancements or may be convenient alternatives.

Two well maintained examples are the Getty Thesaurus of Geographical Names

<<http://www.getty.edu/research/tools/vocabulary/tgn/index.html>>

and the Alexandria Digital Library Gazetteer Server

<<http://fat-albert.alexandria.ucsb.edu:8827/gazetteer/>>.

U.S. Census Bureau — U.S. Gazetteer

<<http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/gazetteer/>>

This gazetteer was designed to identify places to view with the Tiger Map Server and obtain census data from the 1990 Census Lookup Server. It can be used to search for places, counties, or minor civil divisions by entering the name and state abbreviation (optional), or 5-digit zip code.

Abate, Frank R., ed. *American Places Dictionary: A Guide to 45,000 Populated Places, Natural Features, and Other Places in the United States*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1994. E154 A48 1994.

In addition to listing names, this source provides land and water areas, elevation and name origin for counties, cities, towns and CDPs (Census Designated Places).

_____. *Omni Gazetteer of the United States of America. Volume 3, Southeast States*. Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1991. E154 O45 1990.

Includes place names. Type of feature, county, USGS map series, coordinates, and sources.

Andriot, Donna, Jay Andriot, Jeanne Andriot, and Laurie Andriot. *Place Guide*. McLean, Va.: Documents Index, 1990. E155 P63 1990.

Lists the county and state for more than 70,000 incorporated or census designated places in the United States.

Cohen, Saul B., ed. *Columbia Gazetteer of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. G103.5 C65 1998.

A rare source for pronunciation of entries.

Rand McNally and Company. *Rand McNally [year] Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide*. Chicago: Rand McNally, annual. G1019 R22.

Provides an extensive listing of places for each state. The maps have especially clear delineations of county boundaries.

2. MODERN VIRGINIA SOURCES

Biggs, Thomas H. *Geographic and Cultural Names in Virginia*. Information Circular No. 20. Charlottesville: Virginia Division of Mineral Resources, 1974. TN24 V8 A43 no. 20.

Locates Virginia geographic features on the USGS topographic quadrangle maps. Entries are indexed by four categories: place names, water features, landforms, and religious institutions. An appendix provides the quadrangle locations of "State Forests, Parks and Game Management Areas and National Forests, Parks, and Wildlife Refuges." The information in this publication has been updated and expanded by the USGS Geographic Names Information System
<<http://geonames.usgs.gov/gnishome.html>> described above.

DeLorme Mapping Company. *Virginia Atlas and Gazetteer*. Freeport, Me.: DeLorme Mapping, 1995. G1290 D4 1995.

The index to this topographical map atlas includes many names of geographical features often not found in other sources.

Virginia. Dept of Transportation. *Official State Transportation Map*. Richmond: Dept. of Transportation, annual. G3881 P2 [year] V5.

A widely available indexed source.

Virginia Place Name Society. *Occasional Papers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1961. F224 V8. No. 6. Index of the Surface Waters of Virginia

Alphabetical listing notes quadrant location within county.

No. 10. Mountains of Virginia

Alphabetical listing notes quadrant location within county.

The Occasional Papers published by the now defunct Virginia Place Name Society provide excellent sources of information for both location and name origin research. In addition to the statewide papers covered in this finding aid, there are a number of papers in the series that deal with specific places.

3. HISTORICAL SOURCES

Bahn, Gilbert S. *American Place Names of Long Ago*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1998. E155 A58 1998.

"A republication of the Index to Cram's Unrivalled Atlas of the World as Based on the Census of 1890."

Chapin, William. *Complete Reference Gazetteer of the United States of North America*. Virginia Section. New York: T. & E. H. Ensign, 1844. E154 C46.

Remember that in 1844 Virginia included what is now West Virginia. An Index to VA Entries in Chapin's Gazetteer of U.S. (1844) can be found on the Library of Virginia website
<<http://www.lva.lib.va.us>>.

Edwards, Richard. *Statistical Gazetteer of the State of Virginia*. Richmond: For the Proprietor, 1855. F224 E26.

Provides location and sometimes geographical information.

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Gannett, Henry. *A Gazetteer of Virginia and West Virginia*. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing, 1975 (Reprint of 1904 publication). F224 G19 1975.

This source is useful for its extensive listing of populated places and geographic features and the counties where they were located.

Hale, John S. *A Historical Atlas of Colonial Virginia*. Verona, Va.: McClure Press, 1978. G1290 H16.

Although not indexed, the maps included in this atlas show the location and colonial names of many places throughout the state.

Martin, Joseph. *A New and Comprehensive Gazetteer of Virginia, and the District of Columbia*. Charlottesville: Moseley & Tompkins, 1836. F224 M38 1836 or Fiche 135 III 67.

Includes West Virginia place names. An Index to Martin's Gazetteer of VA (1835) can be found on the Library of Virginia website <<http://www.lva.lib.va.us>>.

Nugent, Nell Marion. *Cavaliers and Pioneers: Abstracts of Virginia Land Patents and Grants (1623-1776)*. Richmond, 1934-. F225 N842.

If the location of a patent or grant cannot be determined from the document, sometimes checking the grants for adjoining landowners, as mentioned in the boundaries, will give a broader indication of the site location or pinpoint a landmark that might identify the area. In addition, the index includes references to specific types of watercourses mentioned in the patents and grants.

Swem, E. G. *Virginia Historical Index*. Roanoke: Stone Printing and Manufacturing Company, 1934-36. F221 S93.

"An analysis of information relating to Virginia and Virginians in: Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 1-38, 1893-1930; William and Mary College Quarterly Historical Magazine, 1st ser., v. 1-27 and 2nd ser., v. 1-10, 1892-1930; Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine, v. 1-10, 1919-29; Virginia Historical Register and Literary Advertiser, v. 1-6, 1848-53; Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary, v. 1-5, 1895-1906; Henning's Statutes at Large, v. 1-13; Calendar of Virginia State Papers, v. 1-11." Check for name of place as well as listing under type of place (e.g., towns, mountains, rivers).

Virginia Place Name Society. *Occasional Papers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1961. F224 V8. No. 2. Virginia Place Names 1676

The Occasional Papers published by the now defunct Virginia Place Name Society provide excellent sources of information for both location and name origin research. In addition to the statewide papers covered in this finding aid, there are a number of papers in the series that deal with specific places.

4. POST OFFICE AND DIRECTORY SOURCES

The following three publications provide lists of Virginia place names along with their locations during the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Hummel, Ray Orvin, ed. *A List of Places Included in 19th Century Virginia Directories*. Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1960. Z881 V81 P8 no.11.

By searching all available local directories, the editor compiled a listing of "the names of most of the places existing in Virginia during the last half of the nineteenth century."

Hall, Virginius Cornick. *Virginia Post Offices, 1798-1859*. Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1973. HE6376 V8 H17 1973.

This publication extends the range of Hummel's list by compiling the names of post offices listed from 1819 through 1859 in the "Register of Officers and Agents Civil, Military and Naval in the Service of the United States" as well as some other smaller sources.

Axelson, Edith F. *Virginia Postmasters and Post Offices, 1789-1832*. Athens, Ga.: Iberian Pub., 1991. HE6376 A1 V83 1991.

Axelson expands the range of the two above publications back to 1789, compiles the list by county, and includes the names and dates of appointment of the postmasters. She adds indexes of both the post offices' and postmasters' names.

For further insight into the above materials as well as the additions of place names in the counties, the following microfilm collections show the actual post office records.

United States, National Archives and Record Service. *Post Office Department Reports of Site Locations, 1837-1950. Microform Rolls 602-627, Virginia*. Washington, D.C.: The Archives, 1980. Film 836.

Microfilm copies of forms for site changes and/or name changes of post offices from 1837 through 1950. Names of the postmasters filing the forms are included. Sometimes maps locating the post office in an area are included. Arranged by locality.

United States. Post Office Dept. *Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-September 30, 1971. Microform Rolls 130-135, Virginia*. Washington, D.C.: The Archives, 1973. Film 837.

Microfilm copies of original registers show the names of postmasters, their dates of service and sometimes the reason for change (e.g., ret. or dec.). Arranged by locality.

Narratives of Local Post Office Histories

Way Markings: A Quarterly Journal of Virginia Postal History. Richmond: Virginia Postal History Society (American Philatelic Society Chapter 41). HE6376 A1 V8.

Narrative information on the development and history of Virginia post offices can be found in this journal. A comprehensive index for 1971 through 1994 is also available.

II. RESEARCHING NAME ORIGINS

Hagemann, James A. *The Heritage of Virginia: The Story of Place Names in the Old Dominion*. Norfolk: Donning, 1986. F224 H28 1986.

For each entry the author provides a short history of the place name and the county where it is located. There are no specific references, but a useful bibliography is included. The index alphabetically lists the historical figures mentioned in the book followed by the place names with which they are associated.

Hanson, Raus McDill. *Virginia Place Names: Derivations, Historical Uses*. Verona, Va.: McClure Press, [1969]. F224 H3.

The information in this publication is arranged by "larger areas", "counties with place names", and "independent cities with place names". Each entry provides some information about the place such as location, elevation, history, and name derivation. Sources are given for each entry although many are "Local Resident Information".

Researching Virginia Place Names

Harder, Kelsie B. *Illustrated Dictionary of Place Names: United States and Canada*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976. E155 H37.

Although not all encompassing, this source is useful for its translations of Native American and foreign names, and the identification of founders.

Hidden, Martha W. *How Justice Grew: Virginia Counties, an Abstract of Their Formation*. Williamsburg: Virginia 350th Anniversary Celebration Corporation, 1957. F229 V795 no. 19 1992.

Includes information on the naming of the counties.

Miller, Mary R. *Place-Names of the Northern Neck of Virginia: from John Smith's 1606 Map to the Present*. Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1983. F232 N86 M54.

Salmon, Emily J. and Edward D. C. Campbell, Jr., eds. *The Hornbook of Virginia History: A Ready-Reference Guide to the Old Dominion's People, Places, and Past*. 4th ed. Richmond: Library of Virginia, 1994. F226 V78 1994.

Chapters on cities and counties contain brief statements on the origins of the names.

Virginia Place Name Society. *Occasional Papers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1961. F224 V8.

No. 3. Analysis of Virginia Place-Names as to Origin. (Origin of County Names)

Classifies counties name origins by "Members of the Royal Family," "English Place Names," "Indian Names," etc.

No. 4. Some Notes on Bison in Early Virginia

No. 11. British Origins of Names of Some Old Virginia Homes and Richmond's Kissing Lane

No. 12. The First Names of Virginia

No. 16. Virginia Counties

No. 19. French Place Names in Virginia

The Occasional Papers published by the now defunct Virginia Place Name Society provide excellent sources of information for both location and name origin research. In addition to the statewide papers covered in this finding aid, there are a number of papers in the series that deal with specific places.

III. APPROVED NAMES

Often, in the process of historic research, similar place names will appear. The researcher must then determine whether these names refer to different places or are simply variants of a name for a single place. Since 1890, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names has rendered "formal decisions on new names, proposed changes in names, and names that are in conflict", in an effort to standardize all geographic names for Federal use. The decisions of the Board, along with the variant names considered, help to sort out many of these geographical questions.

The Virginia Advisory Committee to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names considers and makes recommendations to the U.S. Board for decisions concerning Virginia place names. The State Archivist serves as chair of the Virginia Advisory Committee. Correspondence may be directed to the Board at the following address:

*Virginia Advisory Committee on Geographic Names
c/o Office of the State Archivist
Library of Virginia
800 East Broad Street
Richmond, Virginia 23219*

United States Board on Geographic Names. *Approved Place Names in Virginia: An Index to Virginia Names Approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names through 1969*. Comp. Mary Topping. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia [1971]. F224 V8 no.15.

This source lists all decisions on names in Virginia rendered by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names from its beginning through 1969.

United States Board on Geographic Names. *Approved Place Names in Virginia: An Index to Virginia Names Approved by the United States Board on Geographic Names from 1970 through 1973*. Charlottesville: Virginia Place Name Society, 1974. F224 V8 no.18.

United States Board on Geographic Names. *Decisions on Geographic Names in the United States*. Washington, D.C.: Dept. of the Interior, annual. I 33.5/2:.

The results of the Board's decisions are also incorporated in the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) website <<http://geonames.usgs.gov/gnishome.html>>, described in the Large Scope Sources section above.

IV. IN-DEPTH BIBLIOGRAPHIES

The following bibliographies provide extensive information about resources for Virginia place name research. Each cites numerous articles about specific places in Virginia as well as overviews of the literature.

Sealock, Richard B., Margaret M. Sealock, and Margaret S. Powell. *Bibliography of Place-Name Literature: United States and Canada*. 3rd ed. Chicago: American Library Association, 1982. Z6824 S4.

The Virginia section lists many publications addressing specific places as well as statewide topics.

Powell, Margaret S., and Stephen C. Powell. "Bibliography of Place-Name Literature, United States and Canada, 1980-1988." *Names*, 38, nos. 1 & 2 (March - June 1990): 49-141. P323 N3.

An update of the Sealock bibliography.

Virginia Place Name Society. *Occasional Papers*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1961. F224 V8. No. 1. A Preliminary Bibliography of Virginia Place-Name Literature

No. 20. Place Name Research in Virginia: A Handbook

The Occasional Papers published by the now defunct Virginia Place Name Society provide excellent sources of information for both location and name origin research. In addition to the statewide papers covered in this finding aid, there are a number of papers in the series that deal with specific places.

V. ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Three additional resources are found in the LVA archival collection: the papers of the Virginia Place Name Society, the papers of the Virginia Advisory Board to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, and the Map Collection.

The papers of the Virginia Place Name Society (Accession No. 31412) consist of the administrative and working files of the Society, including research conducted on the origin and meaning of place names in Virginia. Also included are the files of the Place Name Survey of Virginia, which was the regional branch of the Place Name Survey of the United States.

The papers of the Virginia Advisory Committee to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names are maintained in the records of the Office of the State Archivist who serves as the chair of the Virginia Committee. They offer information and insight into the debates about the choice of names for the locations under consideration.

The Library of Virginia Map Collection contains more than 60,000 items and includes general historical maps (manuscript and printed maps, and photocopies of Virginia maps from other collections), special groups of historical maps, and USGS topographic quadrangles. The collection also has microfilm copies of the early series of USGS Virginia topographic quadrangles; two series of Sanborn Fire Insurance maps for Virginia (from the Library of Congress and from the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Company Archives); and selected nineteenth-century Virginia maps in the Library of Congress on microfiche. Although there is no comprehensive index to all place names, watercourses, towns, or plantations identified on the maps, researchers may find it helpful to inspect maps for relevant locales and time periods. Further information about the collection is available in Research Notes Number 4, "Using the Map Collection in the Archives at the Library of Virginia." <http://www.lva.lib.va.us/pubserv/archives/Guides_Databases/RN4Maps.htm>